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ABSTRACT

The grassroots movement of whole language philosophies and their applications continue to be attempted by classroom teachers. However, even though educators have been provided with whole language theoretical foundations formulated through solid research conducted in the past 20 years, application into theory involves much more than traditional basal programs require. Recent research indicates it is the teacher's role which guides the philosophy's implementation and includes the reflection of personal educational experiences while questioning current or past methods of instruction. Incorporating new beliefs and practices will create tensions and produce different levels of implementation. Conclusions indicate implementing whole language philosophies involves a process that is individual and continual. Teachers should create learning environments where they can trust their students' ability to acquire knowledge through their own techniques and methods while guiding the journey. (Contains 23 references; appends an 8-item list of books to assist in the transition.) (Author/RS)

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# Examining the Teacher's Role While Moving Toward Whole Language Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

The grassroots movement of whole language philosophies and their applications continue to be attempted by classroom teachers. However, even though educators have been provided with whole language theoretical foundations formulated through solid research conducted in the past twenty years, application into theory involves much more than traditional basal programs require (Goodman, 1986). Recent research indicates it is the teacher's role which guides the philosophy's implementation and includes the reflection of personal educational experiences while questioning current or past methods of instruction. Incorporating new beliefs and practices will create tensions and produce different levels of implementation. Conclusions indicate implementing whole language philosophies involves a process that is individual and continual. Teachers should create learning environments where they can trust their students' ability to acquire knowledge through their own techniques and methods while guiding the journey.

Examining the Teacher's Role

While Moving Toward Whole Language Beliefs and Practices

"I was no different than the others. Returning to college introduced me to a term I had heard but did not understand. Whole language was going to change my beliefs as a teacher and how I taught my students but more importantly, this philosophy was going to bring about a change in my personal life. These were changes no one warned me about. If they had, I wonder if I would have begun the journey in the first place?"

These thoughts reveal some insight into educational change-specifically whole language-and focuses attention on social interactions in the school setting. Even as the grassroots movement toward whole language practices continues many teachers admit that they are still struggling to understand the philosophy underlying this movement. Teachers have been provided with whole language theoretical foundations formulated through solid research conducted in the past twenty years (Holdaway, 1976; Goodman, 1986; Routman, 1994). However, application of this theory into practice means developing a program much more involved than the traditional basal programs. Further, while teachers may strive to teach what's best according to their emerging beliefs, not practices derived from these philosophies will be successful with individual students and teachers may thus become disappointed in their efforts to produce positive change (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Whole language philosophies must be defined beyond literacy learning to include developmentally appropriate practices grounded within theoretical frameworks of authentic classroom instruction (Goodman, 1997). Teachers knowledgeable of child development stages incorporate activities which coincide with what they know is appropriate for each individual student and his/her level of growth (Glazer and Burke, 1994). Bialostok (1997) identifies teachers and researchers who remain committed to pursuing the battle of whole language vs. phonics. The battle and war itself are not the main concerns. The issue centers around the

"evolving role of the classroom teacher" (Monson and Pahl, 1991, p. 51). Proponents of whole language recognize that teachers' beliefs about literacy learning and their method of instruction are equally important within the philosophy (Watson, 1989; Smith, 1973; Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984).

What is the teacher's role in whole language? This review examines themes describing teachers' personal learning experiences and how teachers are led to changing methods of instruction, tensions created when existing beliefs and practices are challenged, acknowledging differing levels and concerns with implementation, and establishing classroom environments to support change efforts. Because whole language is a grassroots, inside-out movement, teachers' efforts to move toward whole language are commonly heard and felt through their own and their students' voices. According to Courtland (1992), "Qualitative research illuminates the processes involved in language learning as well as the dynamics of classroom and instructional settings" (p. 545) Thus, studies cited in this review often come from qualitative research collected from field notes, observation, profiles, and student/teacher interviews.

## Learning, Teaching, and Changing Beliefs

Much research details teachers' past learning and its' significance to their personal teaching styles. For example, Meehan (1998) remembered her traditional grade school round robin reading setting. Inspiration to become a teacher involved her desire to help children learn, not direct their learning. Yet Meehan, once comfortable as a dispenser of knowledge detailed her changing role as a teacher-learner initiated by reading, reflections with colleagues, and her increasing knowledge of how children learn. Meehan acknowledged her growing respect for students' abilities to become active members of the learning community. Short and Burke (1996) conclude,

> Inquiry and change for us often begin with a vague feeling of tension that we may not be able to articulate. Something isn't right, and we aren't sure what it is. Over time, we

get a sense of what is bothering us, and that leads us to take some kind of action. (p. 97)

According to Ridley (1990), there are teachers who see themselves using and applying whole language theories and philosophies, other teachers who seek information concerning "how to" applications, void of theory, and still those who express no curiosity or concern for the philosophy. Tellier's (1990) ethnography narrated her own metamorphous from traditional teacher to whole language facilitator. Using Kubler-Ross's (1975) final stages of growth, she described the denial of discovering whole language teaching when she felt compelled to continue to fit in the mold of the traditional teacher. Second, she described her anger after realizing she was no longer supportive of theories she had once learned and followed. Third, she bargained and negotiated by following school policies while continuing traditional teaching methods yet incorporating whole language philosophies. Fourth, she experienced depression, which led to her return to college. Fifth, she achieved acceptance by discovering that beliefs are constantly redefined giving way to new approaches and theories.

In a related study, Pace (1992) described five teacher models. These models included teachers (1) who were innovators and adopters embracing new theories, (2) those who were susceptible, (3) those expressing dissatisfaction with present policies, (4) those who were nonsusceptible and felt no change was needed in teaching instruction, and (5) those who were resisters setting out to sabotage those attempting to initiate change.

In summary, teachers may incorporate methods which reflect their past learning experiences. Tensions may cause teachers to question how they go about teaching. Further, going through stages of change and experiencing differing roles may be a part of the change process.

## Tensions and Challenges of Past and Present Practices

After teachers make the decision to become whole language facilitators, many hold securely on to past beliefs while trying out new practices. Examining misconceptions/methods for

implementing whole language, Siera and Combs' (1990) year long case study followed two first grade teachers' transition from being traditional teachers to whole language facilitators. One teacher, Nancy, followed administrative restrictions requiring the use of basals during some part of the school day while the second teacher, Sandra, was required to teach through basal instruction for three days per week. While both teachers incorporated whole language philosophies such as inventive spelling, literature-based instruction, and process writing, they maintained traditional practices. Nancy expressed concern for attempting to keep up with all the activities in her classroom. Sandra, although integrating literature-based instruction, felt satisfied knowing she was still teaching skills through basals. Siera and Combs suggest that educators should "accept the coexistence of contradictory beliefs and practices as natural for a period of time while teachers re-educate themselves about new approaches, materials, and beliefs" (p. 126).

While teachers may incorporate old approaches and new beliefs as a part of their methodology, the adjustment and acceptance of seeing their change efforts as progressional may help to alleviate some uncertainties. Investigating teachers' perceptions as they transitioned from traditional teaching to whole language instruction Shepperson and Nistler (1990) administered questionnaires, collected teacher journals and field notes of classroom observations, and tape recorded weekly inservice programs with teachers involved in a staff development program from December-May. Shepperson and Nistler reported that teachers expected to become whole language teachers quickly. Further, they stated that the teachers were relieved when they realized "whole langauge as a way of teaching could not, would not happen overnight" (p. 8). The authors concluded that changing from traditional to whole language philosophies is processional, individually accomplished, and a continual acquisition of knowledge. Implementation suggestions included helping teachers understand differences between past and current instructional theories and supplying aid for teachers implementing

new practices. While some studies suggest that contradictory beliefs should be accepted while making the transition from traditional teaching to whole langauge instruction (Siera & Combs, 1990; Henk & Moore, 1992; Pace, 1992), others contend this practice is inharmonious (Goodman, 1989). Several studies indicate that many teachers are content with their present traditional teaching instruction (Ridley, 1990; Wakefield, 1992). Wakefield (1992) suggested "basal addiction may, in fact, be a strong, inflexible, personal style preference" (p. 187).

While hanging on to the old and implementing new ideas may be accepted, conflicts can occur when misunderstandings of implementation and not enough time to experiment with practices creates confusion. Returning to "known" teaching may take place as teachers strive to find methods they are comfortable using in their classrooms.

Acknowledging Differing Levels and Concerns with Implementation

Administrative mandates or top/down approaches have not been successful in requiring change (Ohlhausen, Meyerson, and Sexton, 1992; Weaver, 1992; Levande, 1990). Some studies focus on the pressure these mandates produce (Pace, 1992) and indicate this procedure produces resistance from teachers, especially from teachers who do not subscribe to whole language instruction (Wakefield, 1992; Pace, 1992). Others suggest concerns can cause differing levels of implementation to occur within the same school settings and districts (Henk and Moore, 1992).

In a qualitative study examining peer and administrative pressure Pace (1992) observed nine teachers in Midwestern and Pacific Northwest states for a period of one year. The author described traditional teachers who initiated their change to whole language instruction by returning to college. All of the teachers encountered resistance from fellow teachers and administrators. Three of the teachers were successful in their transition although all were required by administrative policies to maintain certain traditional practices. Two teachers

moved from their schools due to the tension caused by changing instructional practices. Two other teachers expressed such intense tension from coworkers, they returned to their previous methods of instruction in order to reestablish harmony within their workplaces. Another teacher, because of co-worker disapproval requested and was granted a year's sabbatical to pursue graduate studies.

At the school level, Henk and Moore (1992) found patterns of emergent whole language philosophies in numerous school districts while co-chairing the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Reading Assessment Advisory Committee. These patterns illustrated different levels of implementation. The authors found schools within districts incorporating whole language philosophies, schools within districts implementing differing instructional policies, and school districts where some teachers' instructional approaches were contradictory. The authors expressed concern for students moving within school districts encountering these contrasting approaches.

In sum, administrative pressure mandating change and the resistance of new approaches can lead to individual schools and school districts conflicting in levels of implementing whole language philosophies.

## Classroom Environments, Activities, and Individual Support

The teacher's role should include creating supportive learning environments and being a facilitator of activities promoting positive classroom learning. Additionally, teachers can examine and encourage individual student growth. Duke and Stewart's (1997) collaborative study describes Stewart's classroom environment where first grade students engaged in reading and writing activities for real purposes. First, Stewart and her students discussed the reasons for writing. Second, she created experiences which developed audience participation and therefore encouraged students to share their ideas with classmates, parents, and their teacher. As an example, classroom activities were recorded on calendars sent home while a reading

workshop engaged students in reading to their classmates for practice. Successful implementation was due to the incorporation of individual interests allowing students to explore their own purposes for learning.

Bruneau (1997) identified scheduling, determining the relevance of specific activities, and incorporating these activities into daily class time as concerns for teachers. The author suggested incorporating a "Literacy Pyramid" (p. 158) to include opportunities for students to develop listening skills through the teacher's daily reading of literature, encourage active participation through the sharing of reading and writing, provide small group guided activities and workshops to practice what has been read and written, and develop the relationship between these experiences with skill knowledge.

To gain insights for successful implementation of whole language Pils (1993) explored the effects of whole language instruction with her first grade students. The author analyzed her own past lesson plan books and student records and concluded she needed to value her students' previous knowledge, and through scaffolding, allow them to learn through their own terms. By establishing a level of trust and finding a hook to bring in each child, Pils concluded she could make her students become valued, successful literary members within the classroom.

Research suggests whole language classrooms are supportive environments which provide activities to enhance class and individual experiences. Teachers can accomplish these goals by encouraging and following child-directed learning.

## Summary and Conclusions

The research cited here indicates there are different kinds of teachers just as there are students. We know we must learn to accept and value our students' differences and levels of learning. This is true of fellow teachers as well. Becoming a whole language facilitator is a process reflecting who we have been as students and who we strive to become as teachers. This may be a long process and hanging on to the old while experimenting with the new may be part of

the journey.

Whole language instruction must be grounded in theory. We justify the way we teach to those who question and threaten our belief. Teachers should be ready to learn new ways of working with their students through the opportunities of college courses, inservices, and/or workshops. Finally, all educators must question, reflect, and assess not only whole language but all methods of instruction in an effort to continually seek out what's right for the students we teach and love (Wakefield, 1992; Holdaway, 1976).

> "I couldn't understand why every teacher I knew wasn't realizing that whole language was the only way to teach. Why, too, did I lose close friends who I had taught beside for ten years? Why did I find myself requesting a transfer to another school after administrative pressure to return to past traditional instructional methods? I know through my journey to a whole language classroom I have kept my students' interests at heart, and that has been in fact the greatest gift..."

Books to Assist in the Transition

Brown, H. and Mathie, V. (1991). Inside whole language: A classroom view. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman.

Crafton, L. (1991). Whole language: Getting started...moving forward. New York: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.

Glazer, S. M. and Burke, E. M. (1994). An integrated approach to early literacy: Literature and language. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

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Harste, J. C., Woodward, V. A., and Burke, C. L. (1984). Language stories and literacy lessons. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman.

Holdaway, D. (1976). The foundations of literacy. New York: Heineman.

Newman, J. M. (1990). Finding our own way: Teachers exploring their assumptions. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman.

Whitmore, K. and Goodman, Y. (1996). Whole language voices in teacher education. Columbus, OH: Stenhouse Publishers.

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Ohlhausen, M., Meyerson, M., and Sexton, T. (1992). Viewing innovations through the efficacy-based model: A whole language application. Journal of Reading, 35(7), 536-541.

Pace, G. (1992). Stories of teacher-initiated change from traditional to whole language instruction. The Elementary School Journal, 92(4), 461-476.

Pils, L.J. (1993). "I love you, Miss Piss." The Reading Teacher, 46(8), 648-653.

Ridley, L. (1990). Enacting change in elementary school programs: Implementing a whole language perspective. The Reading Teacher, 43(9), 640-646.

Routman, R. (1994). Invitations. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman.

Shepperson, G.M., & Nistler, R.J. (1990). Whole language collaboration project: Three case studies to represent change. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Reading Association, Nashville, TN.

Siera, M. & Combs, M. (1990). Transitions in reading instruction: Handling contradictions in beliefs and practices. Reading Horizons, 31(2), 113-126.

Tellier, P. (1990). The walls are shaking: An appreciation of how we grow through change. The Reading Teacher, 44(4), 326-328.

Wakefield, A.P. (1992). An investigation of teaching style and orientation to reading instruction. Reading Improvement, 29(3), 183-187.

Watson, D.J. (1989). Defining and describing whole language. The Elementary School Journal, 90(2), 129-141.

Weaver, C. and Henke, L. (1992). Supporting whole language: Stories of teacher and institutional change. Portsmouth, NJ: Heineman.

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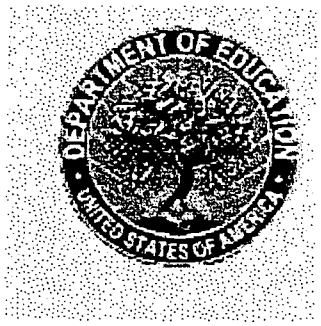

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